

Below
(From left) Gonzalo, Raul, Marrero and Eduardo gather at a local mechanic's house.



AN AUTO UNION

Against the odds, a group of Cuban enthusiasts have joined forces to keep their 1950s two-stroke DKWs and Auto Unions on the road

Words David Lillywhite Photography Matthew Howell



TWO-STROKES IN HAVANA



We know Havana, don't we? The faded elegance of the architecture, the heat, the cigars and rum, the pretty girls in tight dresses strutting insolently past old men sat cogitating in the shade, and of course all those '50s Chevrolets, Chryslers, Fords, Oldsmobiles, Studebakers... Oh, and DKWs and Auto Unions.

Yes, it's true. There are as many European cars of the 1950s in Havana as there are Yank Tanks, but they don't make for such obvious picture-postcard subjects. Nonetheless, you'll see Austins, Morris Minors, Beetles, Hillmans, Saabs, Moskvichs and many more. Keeping them on the road now is a near-impossible task, and so when Audi Tradition (the company's heritage division) heard of a group of Cuban DKW and Auto Union owners trying to form an owners' club, they decided to help – and invited *Octane* to join in.

So, welcome to the parallel universe of classic car ownership in Cuba. Why Audi Tradition? Because DKW was one of the four companies that formed Auto Union (which later became Audi), represented by the four rings of the logo. Why *Octane*? Because anything automotive and interesting is fair game, and attempting to run late-50s three-cylinder two-strokes in Cuba, without spares, is nothing if not interesting.

'These cars might be driven out of necessity, but the affection for them runs deep'

WE'VE JUST arrived at our apartment on the outskirts of Havana (having travelled open-mouthed all the way from the '60s Krushchev-decor airport) when we encounter our first Cuban DKW. We know it's coming, not just from the squawking of the chickens scurrying to clear the road but from the ring-a-ding of the two-stroke, and as we look out of the window there it is, metallic blue paintwork wreathed in a halo of matching blue smoke, occupants waving enthusiastically. Meet successful Cuban artist Eduardo Yanes, his scientist-turned-art-curator wife Sussette Martinez and their friend Orlando García Milián, a professional tour guide.

This is Eduardo's everyday car but Orlando drives it too. It's a 1959 DKW 3=6, and anywhere else you'd say it was in need of restoration. Here, though, it's simply in need of a third

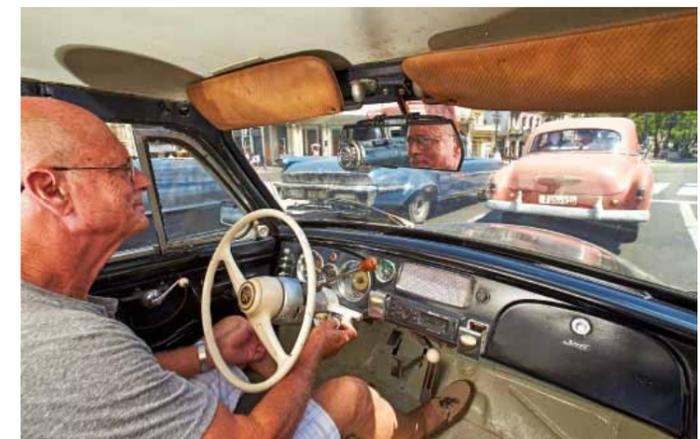
cylinder, because one seems to have stopped working, to Eduardo's dismay.

'You've arrived at a critical time!' he says. 'In 13 years I've never had to repair it but now the engine needs a rebuild.'

Audi Tradition's historian Thomas Erdmann has brought along a new distributor base and a new crankshaft from Germany, gold dust in these parts, and Eduardo has managed to find a donor car, complete with most trim parts though no engine, so a rebuild is on the way.

'Today is not a good day,' says Eduardo, 'but normally – on three cylinders – it goes very well, you feel that *vroom*. This is a hot country so it works very hard but usually it goes perfectly.' It stalls, and Eduardo sighs, tips back his Panama hat and lights a consolatory roll-up.

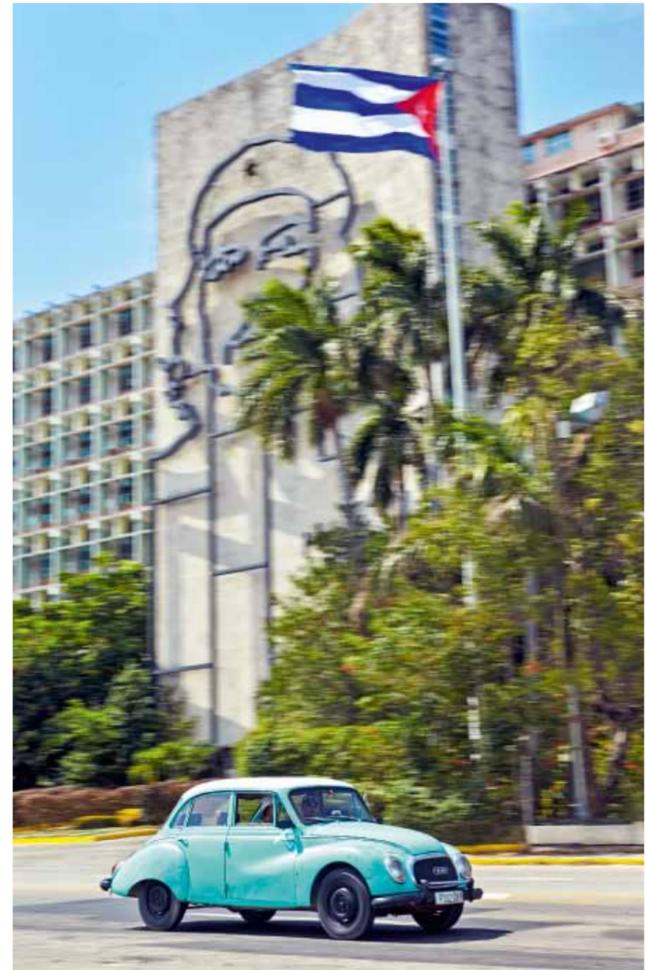
Sussette and Eduardo have gathered together fellow owners to meet their saviours from Audi Tradition. They run old cars out of necessity, not nostalgia, because import controls and US sanctions made it difficult to buy cars, parts and fuel after Castro took power in 1959. Only officials, doctors and anyone with Government connections or proof of foreign exchange income were allowed to purchase new imported cars, many of them from the Soviet Union (there are lots of scruffy old Ladas around). When in 2011 it became possible to import cars again, initially only with individual Government →



Top, above and left Gonzalo's silver Auto Union 1000SP; Marrero in his Auto Union 1000 Coupé; Juliet and Jesús (front right of picture) with Camilo's DKW estate, Raul's white Auto Union and their own light green Auto Union.



Below
The famous Yank Tank taxis in the beautiful centre of Old Havana; Juliet's Auto Union passes Che Guevara in Revolution Square.



Main picture
Juan's blue Auto Union 1000S and Joso's DKW 3=6 deep in Old Havana. Many buildings are under restoration but it's a huge task.





Left
Eduardo's and Camilo's DKWs
outside the building that served
as Havana's DKW and Auto
Union dealership in the 1950s.



*'We have lots of
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I'm alive I'm going
to continue to fix it'*

permission, they were subject to such huge taxes that the average Cuban was unable to buy them.

Now there are plenty of relatively modern cars, though anything that's not new may well be in a poor state of repair – we've hired a minibus that's had its seatbelts and wipers removed, and there's a stench of diesel from leaking fuel hoses, but that becomes irrelevant when it throws a drive belt and is towed away.

Yet this is the way it is here. Life is more relaxed, cars travel slowly along the potholed tarmac, and pedestrians wander across the road at will. There's lots of hooting but it's friendly, to warn of a vehicle's approach, and though you'll see the occasional overloaded lorry or family-on-a-scooter, there's none of the madness of, say, Morocco or India. Driving in Havana

feels much safer than in Rome, Paris, London and all those other non-stop European cities.

Most of all, the people are lovely; Eduardo and Orlando lead us to a mechanic friend's house, where we meet a few of the other owners, including Gonzalo Mendez, who talks happily of the beauty of the countryside, and asks several times what we think of his country and if we'll come back. We promise we will.

The group set to examining Eduardo's sick engine, though there's so much banter and smoking that it seems unlikely there will be a rapid fix. We arrange to meet up with the full group in a restaurant later and leave them to it.

This turns out to be a historic evening in the world of Cuban cars. We arrive on time, and await the happy buzz of two-strokes. Time seems more flexible here but eventually they start to arrive, albeit with the sad news that the rare DKW Munga jeep is stranded with a blown head gasket.

The meal starts with presentations of books, plaques and heritage certificates from Audi Tradition, prompting excitement, gratitude and several informal speeches from the owners. Two phrases stick in my mind: 'To have a DKW in Cuba is heroic', and 'Audis in Cuba are part of our culture'. These cars might be driven out of necessity, but the affection for them runs deep.

And so the meal turns into the inaugural meeting of the Cuban DKW and Auto Union Owners' Club, and we agree to meet next day among the grand buildings of Old Havana. It's there that we really get to know everyone.

Gonzalo first, on his hand-painted silver 1959 Auto Union 1000SP Coupé: 'After the triumph of the revolution,' he says, 'I was working at the Ministry of Fisheries, and the Government gave me the Auto Union to use so I could travel to the eastern part of the island. I used to come and go each month, about 800km each way. Then in 1987 the Government sold the car to me, and I've had it ever since.'

'Nowadays we have lots of difficulties finding parts but while I'm alive I'm going to continue to fix it. The problem is, it breathes! It's alive!'

Marrero Daria has owned his black 1958 Auto Union 1000 Coupé de Luxe since 1975. 'In Cuba we never had spare parts for DKWs, →



just cars,' he says, 'but from 1965 spares started to come in for Wartburgs. So in order to survive we adapted parts like Wartburg pistons, and that's why they're still running. All the Wartburg parts are gone too now, so things are adapted by us. Imagine, we have repaired DKWs with parts from MZ motorcycles! We're not mechanics – our cars are alive because of a miracle!

This is aptly illustrated by Joso Carlo Gonzalez, whose green DKW 3=6 sat unused for five years with its previous owner. 'The timing was out. Five mechanics came to see it and couldn't fix it, but I could. The carburettor was impossible to mend but I adapted one from a stationary generator. I made the air filter from a gas mask.'

The owner of the blue DKW 3=6 Universal (estate), Camilo Moré, is similarly self-taught. 'There are no mechanics for these cars but now with the internet and help from my friends here I can do it myself. I can rebuild engines!'

Raul Jiménez bought his white Auto Union 1000SP Coupé in 1989. 'I liked the aerodynamic look of the car,' he says. 'Ladies love it! I have tried to invent solutions – it's a floor shift [instead of column change], the starter motor is from a Lada, and it has electric windows!'

Raul's Auto Union sits on a Wartburg chassis, endowing it with coil-sprung rear suspension instead of leaf springs, and a slightly elevated gait. If it appears to be bending a little in the

middle, that's because it is – but it runs well.

Pablo Prieto Goit is here with his uncle, Juan Suárez Perera, who has owned his Auto Union 1000S Coupé for 50 years. It has a homemade rear bumper and the radiator has seen better days but it's *reliable*. Pablo himself has owned a similar car for 20 years. 'It's very easy to drive,' he says, 'but the lack of spare parts...'

The newest to the fold is Juliet Celestrin Ramos, here with boyfriend Jesús Lopez. She's owned her 1959 Auto Union 1000 for just a year, and bought it because 'I saw a car and liked it at that moment; I'm its third owner.'

We take a tour, swapping between Eduardo's and Camilo's DKWs, crashing over potholes, doors shaking in the sun-hardened remains of their seals, engines buzzing dementedly as we head to the seafront and the Malecón, along which Moss, Fangio and Shelby once raced and where the grandeur of Old Havana meets the 1950s modernism of Vedado, and then to the Plaza de la Revolución. We dice (slowly) with the other DKWs and Auto Unions, weaving (considerately) between the American cars as we cruise the fascinating streets of Havana. Sure, these cars are a long way from perfection, but here they really are heroic. **End**

THANKS TO all the owners, especially Sussette, Eduardo and Orlando, and all at Audi Tradition.

'We're not mechanics – our cars are alive because of a miracle!'